

# The Baptism of Jesus – Matt Zahniser

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

[This sermon includes post-delivery editing.]

In the early days of my short missionary career in Egypt, I was invited to a small village to preach in a church there and took a couple of young Egyptian men along with me as interpreters and counselors. At the village we met the mayor of the town for lunch. The lunch was a spread of delightful Egyptian food. It was so good I wanted to make an elaborate a statement of appreciation, so I said “This is heavenly food.”

Or that is what I intended to say, hādha aklun samāwī. What I actually said was hādha aklun simmāwī which means, “This is poisonous food.” The mayor froze in shock. The Egyptians, suffering from inadequate suppression of laughter, tried to tell the mayor what I must have been trying to say. When they informed me about what I had actually said, something like, “This is food of or pertaining to people who kill dogs with poison.” I apologized profusely, clarified what I meant, and urged them to translate my apologies so that I would not further annihilate my relationship with our generous host.

At first glance this looks like just an inadvertent mistake in language. It was, however, a much deeper error. It was an error in **cultural** knowledge and sensitivity. As an American I was searching for a creative, new, and elaborate expression of flattery for the meal. Egyptians, especially in traditional villages such as the one I was visiting do not like innovation, creativity, and cleverness in social relationships. They value tradition, continuity, and civility. If I had said what any polite Egyptian would have said, “Thank you very much; may you eat this well forever,” the mayor would have known what I was trying to say even if I made some mistakes in saying it.

Let me explain. Culture is the environment people live in that allows them to interpret reality, generate socially approved behavior, and live well (See Geertz, 89 for a good definition of culture). Human culture is an environment for growth. Different people groups have different environments for growth in knowledge, belief, appropriate behavior, and in interpreting reality. This concept of culture is very helpful in understanding the meaning of baptism. I want to demonstrate this by looking in the Gospel reading at the **word** baptism, the concept of **wilderness**, and the centrality of **witness: word, wilderness, and witness**.

Mark 1:1-15 The Prologue

**A** <sup>1</sup>The beginning of the **good-news** of **Jesus Christ**, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of

you, who will prepare your way ; <sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in **the wilderness**: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of him.’”

**B** <sup>4</sup>**John** the baptizer appeared in the **wilderness**, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now **John** was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and **wild** honey.

**C** <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have **baptized** you with water; but he will **baptize** you with the Holy Spirit.”

**B** <sup>9</sup>In those days **Jesus** appeared from Nazareth of Galilee and was **baptized** by **John** in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” <sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove out him into **the wilderness**. <sup>13</sup>He was in **the wilderness** forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the **wild** beasts; and the angels waited on him.

**A** <sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested **Jesus** came to Galilee, proclaiming the **good-news** of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the **good news**.”

**A**: Isaiah’s good-news | **B**: John’s appearance | **C** John’s proclamation | **B**’: Jesus’ appearance | **A**’ Jesus’ good-news

Table constructed according to the analytical method called Semitic rhetoric ([www.rhetoricbiblicaesemitica.org](http://www.rhetoricbiblicaesemitica.org)).

**Figure 1** The Prologue to the Gospel according to Mark.

See Figure 1 (just above), showing the structure of Mark 1:1-15. I put the whole introduction or prologue of Mark’ Gospel in a table to show how the passage is organized. Jewish writers in Bible times, even those such as Mark writing in Greek, organized their compositions as shown without the boxes of course.

A hah! Even speaking and writing are culturally diverse.

Verses 1-3 (A) and verses 14-15 (A’) frame the passage with the concept of **good-news**. Verses 4-6 (B) and 9-13 (B’) both begin with identical verbs translated **appeared**. In both sections John baptizes: in verses 4-6 the people, and in verses 9-13, Jesus. He baptizes in a place called **the**

**wilderness** where Jesus also goes to be tempted. John's proclamation of Jesus occupies the center (c), marking it as especially important.

### Baptism: the Word

A form of the word **baptism** occurs six times in these 15 verses. The basic, you might say the secular meaning of the Greek verb *baptizō* is to wash in order to clean, it is a synonym of the verb *baptō*, "to dip or immerse in." Mark uses a form of the verb *baptizō* in chapter 7, verse 4: "nor do they eat anything that comes from the market unless they *wash* it" (other authorities read "unless they wash themselves") (Flemington, 348). I will use the word "immersion" for *baptizō*, not to privilege a particular mode of baptism by that name, but to preserve the word's symbolic meaning.

This brings us to the second meaning of baptism, its sacramental meaning. It is a sacrament of incorporation into the community of Christian faith as well as of forgiveness, cleansing, and the reception of the Spirit. We baptize children, even infants, because they too are members of the Christian family. They too receive the Spirit, though it is not easy to detect the evidence of the Spirit's presence. For the same reason, we offer them communion—children also eat with their family of faith.

For those able to understand, baptism means death to our allegiance to nation or culture as ultimate or primary and resurrection into, and immersion in, a new primary and ultimate allegiance, a new way of thought and life in community. Infants and children will learn this at home and in church and see it modeled by older children and adults. Paul put this ultimate transformation that baptism symbolizes as follows, ". . . we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Our new primary and ultimate loyalty does not replace our old loyalties to self, family, community and nation; it rather transforms these allegiances by making them servants of the Ultimate and Intimate God we serve in Jesus Christ. In other words baptism symbolizes our immersion in a new culture, the culture of God's reign. God's culture transforms all cultures, so that Egyptian Christian culture will differ from American Christian culture; but the ultimate allegiance of both will be to the culture of God as revealed in Jesus and maintained by the Holy Spirit, working in the community of faith we call church.

### Baptism: its **wilderness** setting.

Baptism can also mean "to suffer severely" (Louw and Nida, 1.286, 2.43), in other words, baptism can refer to immersion in an ordeal. Jesus uses this meaning of the word in responding to the request of James and John to sit on his right and on his left when he comes into his kingdom, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" he asks them (Mark 10:38). He had already told them three times about his

coming ordeal at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). So here's where wilderness comes into our discussion.

A glance at Figure 1 above will show you that **wilderness** represents a key word in Mark's prologue. Mark never uses the word again in his Gospel. In the wilderness, John proclaims "a baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (v 4); in the wilderness John baptizes a horde of people from Jerusalem and Judea (v 5); in the wilderness, John baptizes Jesus (v 9); and in the wilderness a dove, representing the Spirit, descends, and a voice announces Jesus' special identity and pronounces God's approval and blessing upon him (v 10). That same Spirit drives—note this word—drives Jesus out into the wilderness where he fasts and is tempted among the wild animals (1:12 -13). In other words, wilderness is the place of an ordeal of preparation for Jesus—his bout with temptation, his forty days of fasting!

**Wilderness** is a wild and natural place. It was "a place of revelation and of Israel's constitution." In Jewish lore, wilderness was "beyond the bonds of society" (Allison, 564-65; France, 56-58). A place, as my father used to say, "where the hand of man has never set foot." A wilderness experience, as many of you have learned, is a baptism into a world absent of the cultural symbols comforts and conveniences that adorn our human society. It provides an environment for growth and transformation of perspective.

Most of us have heard of the festival of Hanuka that Jews celebrate around the time of Christmas. It is a celebration of the Jewish defeat of the massive Seleucid army defending their domination of Israel in the second century before the birth of Christ. Five brothers known as the Maccabees, led a Jewish revolt that established a Jewish King over the Jewish people with miraculous help from God.

By the time of Jesus, the Romans were masters of the Jewish people. Under the boot of Roman occupation and oppression, the Jews longed for freedom. Jesus who would raise the dead, heal the afflicted, and feed the multitudes would make a great liberator for a Jewish spring. But redemptive violence was not at the heart of God's culture. If Jesus were to resist the strong cultural pressure to be a warrior king, he needed a wilderness experience. He needed a time to rise above these cultural pressures. Jesus knew that his path lay through the baptism of suffering. He knew he would probably have to take that path alone. God knew it too and so "the Holy Spirit drove him out into the wilderness!" (1:12). The wilderness ordeal tested him until he knew he was ready. He was ready when the time came to proclaim the good news of God (1:15), and he was prepared for the baptism of his final ordeal.

A wilderness perspective is a means of reminding us that we too can be independent of what our culture demands of us.

I would like to tackle just one of the dimensions of divine culture that clashes with American culture. I am speaking of Jesus' startling proclamation that the highest role in society is that of servant. Even the anointed one, the messiah and king, "came not to be served, but to serve and

give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He came to teach and to model a culture of God that seeks more to under-gird followers than to overwhelm their oppressors. Jesus stood against the prevailing culture of dominance and violent liberation.

Jesus’ way challenges a prominent if not dominate myth of our American culture, the myth of redemptive violence.

The myth can briefly be outlined as follows: An indestructible good guy is unalterably opposed to an incorrigible and . . . indestructible bad guy. . . . [the good guy suffers much] and appears hopelessly trapped, until somehow the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order. . . . (Wink, 17-20).

This mythic story surfaced for my generation in the weekly episodes of the Lone Ranger, a pure, innocent, and unselfish masked cowboy who with his wits and six shooter out-plotted and out-gunned the evil man or men who threatened others. Other examples of the popular media that inculcate the myth of redemptive violence include among many others: Superman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Superwoman, Mighty Mouse, Captain Marvel, Captain America, the Green Hornet, Batman and Robin, Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote. Or so Walter Wink wrote twenty years ago now (Wink, 17-20).

Let me bring Wink up to date with one example. The final Harry Potter film “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2,” released last summer, included a significant change from the J. K. Rowling book it was based on. In Rowling’s books

Harry never kills anyone. He scatters dementors with his patronus charm; he stuns opponents. Once he wounds his student nemesis, and once in anger he causes torturous pain. But Harry never kills (Wylie-Kellerman, 30, italics mine).

In the final book, Voldemort, Harry’s deadly enemy, dies by his own rebounding curse. In the film’s final scene, however,

It is not the curse of death vs. the non-violent disarming of the opponent. . . . It is just plain Might and Right. Voldemort dies at the hand of a stronger wizard with a more powerful claim on the wand. Which is to say, *finally Harry kills*. The real victory of death. . . . the myth of redemptive violence survives. (Wylie-Kellerman, 30-31, italics mine).

It is possible to interpret the film in a way compatible with the book. Harry never actually kills Voldemort; nevertheless the villain does die in a violent confrontations of spells. In any case we need to do some wilderness thinking about this and others of our cultural myths and themes in light of the good news of the kingdom of God. We need a new immersion in the way of Jesus for our time.

We proceed now to the center of Mark's prologue, the **witness** of John to Jesus, and the final meaning of the word baptisma, or "baptism."

Baptism: the centrality of **Witness**.

Baptism can also mean "to cause religious experience" (Louw and Nida, 1.539, 2.43). Or dare we say immersion in the Spirit?

Our lectionary reading from the book of Acts illustrates this. Paul asks a dozen or so disciples, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They reply that they have never heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul after referring to the witness of John and the baptism of Jesus, baptizes them and lays hands on them. Then, "the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:1-7). This is baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. The Ephesian dozen had been baptized, but discovering they knew nothing of the Holy Spirit, received the Spirit by the laying on of Paul's hands.

The baptism of Jesus himself fits this very model: He is baptized by John in the Jordan (Mark 1:9), and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:10). He too is baptized in the Spirit who drives him out into the wilderness (1:12). At Pentecost (Acts 2) a crowd of Jews, and in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) a group of Gentiles, while listening to the story of Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit first and then were baptized with water. When you are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you receive the Spirit, whether you have a profound religious experience or not. The evidence of the Spirit's presence will appear along the way, especially when you are baptized with suffering or face an ordeal or when you need, like John, to bear witness to Jesus on behalf of someone else. I, myself, was baptized only quite a few months after my most profound experience of the Spirit. The morning after recommitting my life to following Jesus, I had an overwhelming sense of the brightness of colors, the vividness, of sound, and an overwhelming new motivation for things I had never really prioritized before. This experience occurred only a month after two months of periodic wilderness experience (for the wilderness experiences see Zahniser). My children were all baptized as infants. My wife, Ann, and I took the vows for them. They were incorporated into the body of Christ we call the church and gifted with the Spirit. When they formally joined the church they had a chance to confirm for themselves what Ann and I had affirmed for them when they were infants and toddlers.

This connection between receiving and spirit and baptism does not mean we cannot be filled with the spirit or baptized in the spirit when we need comfort, confirmation, transformation, guidance, or empowerment at any time. God is not bound by some preconceived order of salvation.

But what about our third "W" word, **witness**?

The word does not occur in our prologue, Mark uses the word “proclaimed” (a form of the Greek word *kērussō*). John has already proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4); but it is John’s second proclamation that announces that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (1:7-8).

That Jesus will baptism with the Holy Spirit in verse eight is the climax of the center of Mark’s prologue. But notice that verse seven begins with “He proclaimed,” referring to John. Now, revisiting Figure 1 above, you will see that these two verses occupy the very center of the prologue of Mark’s Gospel. Biblical writers often privilege and emphasize what they place at the center of what they write. What Mark privileges in this way is not the saying of the voice in verse 11, “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” even though you can tell from this witness to Jesus that it is God’s own witness!

Mark placed the human witness of John in the center of his prologue. Mark even echoes this witness at the end of his Gospel. At the center of his brief conclusion or epilogue (15:40-16:8), he puts, not an appearance of Jesus, but the witness of a young messenger clad in the white garment of an angel: “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him” (16:6).

As a matter of fact, here at St. Paul’s, by standing to hear the Gospel reading, we emphasize it as a witness to Jesus.

When it comes to living out the culture of God in the midst of our own culture we need to draw on the gift of the Spirit we received at baptism. And especially for an effective human witness to Jesus that sometimes has to anger the crowd, disappoint a friend, or even challenge a family—we need an infusion of faith, love, wisdom, and courage from the Spirit—help in pointing away from ourselves to Jesus: the one who is more powerful than we; the one whom we are unworthy of serving; and the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me again the collect for the First Sunday of the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord, found on the first page of your worship folder:

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Sources

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